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ABSTRACT

This document, which was written for adult educators in Georgia, offers instructional plans and practical strategies for helping students in adult literacy, adult basic education (ABE), General Educational Development, and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) programs live longer and healthier lives. The document begins with a discussion of why basic health information and health promotion activities are especially important for ABE and ESL students. The remainder of the document presents and explains three learning activities to help adult students improve their health and maintain a healthy lifestyle. The first activity teaches students to examine and understand health statistics, including statistics presented in the form of bar graphs and a pie chart. In the second activity, students learn to solve common health problems by reading case studies and using a group problem-solving approach to solve the problems posed by each case study. The third activity, which is conducted over several class periods, requires that students conduct outside research work to obtain information about how to live longer. The following items are included for each activity: overview and rationale; list of skills developed in the activity; materials needed; steps educators should take to prepare for and conduct the activity; discussion questions; and student handout. (MN)

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ED 461 025

Helping Students Live Longer and Healthier Lives

Beyond Basic Skills: Innovative Teaching Materials for Georgia's Teachers of Adults
volume 1, number 4, Summer 1997

Tom Valentine and Jenny Sandlin, Co-Editors

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Beyond Basic Skills

Innovative Teaching Materials for Georgia's Teachers of Adults

Volume 1, Number 4 Summer 1997

Beyond Basic Skills **offers instructional plans and practical strategies designed for immediate use by teachers in Georgia's adult literacy, ABE, GED, and ESL programs. This issue focuses on HEALTH LITERACY. We hope you'll find these activities useful.**

Tom Valentine
Jenny Sandlin
Co-Editors

Helping Students Live Longer and Healthier Lives

Even in a country as rich as the United States, life expectancy is not as long as it could be. The average life expectancy in the United Kingdom, Japan, Germany, Sweden, and Canada exceeds that of our country, despite the fact that the U.S. spends more than twice as much per capita on health care as these countries.

Still, when compared with most of the world's population, the people in the U.S. live reasonably long lives. Unfortunately, certain distinct groups in America cannot expect to live as long as other groups. Consider these facts from recently published reports:

- Women can expect to live more than six years longer than men.
- Whites can expect to live nearly seven years longer than African Americans.
- The death rate for those with less than twelve years of schooling is more than double the death rate of persons with at least some college.

Although experts debate about the extent to which shorter life expectancies can be attributed to genetic make-up versus individual behavior, few would deny that individuals can take positive actions to improve their chances of living long and healthy lives. Newspapers and magazines are full of articles urging healthier life styles and extolling the virtues of exercise, proper nutrition and preventative medicine. Bookstores are stocked with self-help books that suggest how to make life-prolonging changes in our lives. Unfortunately, many of our students don't read enough outside the classroom to take advantage of this information. Some writers have described low-literate adults as "information poor," and in the critically important area of health, this is almost certainly an apt description.

Everyday, many of our students put themselves at risk unnecessarily. Fat intake is much higher for low income groups than for the more affluent. Low income adults are more apt to be overweight, experience hypertension, and develop osteoporosis. Many educated people have quit smoking, while many members of the poor and working class continue to smoke. Geographically speaking, Georgia exceeds the national averages with respect to rates of violent crime, AIDS cases, and infant mortality, while the percentage of people with health insurance is lower.

All of this information leads to the conclusion that our students are in need of information that can help them to lead longer and healthier lives. One of the major reasons that some underdeveloped nations embark on ambitious literacy campaigns is to disseminate health information. But in the U.S., where health quality seems satisfactory for the majority of the population, health education has been slow to catch on among literacy educators.

There are over a thousand adult literacy and ESL teachers in Georgia, and if we work together, we can make a difference in our students' lives. The three activities in this issue will allow you to get going on this important work. The activities are designed in such a way that you don't have to be a health expert to teach them, but through reading and discussion, your students can acquire information that may help them lead longer and healthier lives.

Planning the Sessions

The activities in this issue are designed for group instruction. You might try teaching all three activities as part of a special, multi-part workshop called "Learning to Live Longer and Healthier Lives."

Alternately, the activities can stand alone and be integrated into regular classroom instruction as desired. In general, the earlier activities will be easier--for both learners and teachers--and the later activities will be more challenging. The time required for the activities will vary depending on your teaching style and the size of your group.

Activity #1: Examining Health Statistics: How Healthy Are We?

Overview and Rationale

This activity has two main purposes. The first is to expose students to some specific statistics concerning health in the U.S. In this activity we present charts showing some of the disparities in how good health is distributed in this country and also some of the major causes of death among adults. Awareness of these statistics may inspire students, many of whom are members of disadvantaged groups, to take steps to improve their health and longevity. This activity offers students a chance to look at some statistics and data concerning health and presents an opportunity for them to discuss some of the reasons why good health is distributed unevenly.

The other main purpose of this activity is to give students practice reading information in graphical form. Students will not only encounter statistics and information presented in the concise forms of graphs and charts on the GED exam, but also when reading newspapers and magazines, or when watching television news. In order to understand information presented to them through these media and to fully participate in society, students must be competent graph readers and interpreters. This activity will give students practice reading charts and graphs using information important for their lives.

Skills Developed in this Activity

Understanding of charts and graphs, critical thinking, and critical discussion skills.

Materials Needed for this Activity

✓ A copy of the handout entitled "Activity #1: Examining Health Statistics," for each learner (see p. 5).

✓ Activity #1 Discussion Guide for you.

How to Prepare for this Activity

✓ Review the handout for Activity #1 and the discussion guide. Adapt them based on your own preferences and what you know about your learners.

What to Do in the Session

1. Begin with a general discussion about health. Ask students which groups they think are most healthy (men or women, people with some college education or without a high school diploma) and why. Also, ask them what they think the major causes of death are. Write their ideas on the board to be used later to compare to the charts on the handout.
2. Ask students how they would find out if their estimates were true. Tell them that there are governmental agencies whose job it is to survey people and examine death certificates to find out the answers to these questions. These numbers are then often presented in the forms of charts or graphs.
3. Say that in this activity they will be looking at some statistics concerning health and causes of death in the United States. Distribute the handout.
4. Begin with a general discussion about charts. Ask students if they have seen bar charts or pie graphs before, and ask why they think information sometimes is presented in charts. If charts and graphs are new to learners, take some time explaining what bar charts and pie graphs are referring to the first part of the discussion guide below if you need a refresher. You want learners to know that sometimes information can be presented more efficiently in charts. You can also use this opportunity to discuss the limitations and strengths of these types of statistics and charts. On one hand, you must be careful about interpreting statistics because some information is always missing. On the other hand, charts and statistics can stimulate a learner's search for more information.
5. Next lead students through a more specific discussion of each chart, using the discussion guide below.

Optional Supplemental Activity

Either before or after going through the activity handout, you could have students collect health behavior information (who smokes, who exercises, who is overweight) from friends and family. They could then generate their own bar charts based on this information, and experiment with different categories other than gender and educational attainment (such as rural/urban, ethnic background, etc.). Compare the class charts to the charts provided in the activity.

Activity #1 Discussion Guide

Types of Charts and Graphs:

Bar Graph -- consists of parallel bars with lengths representing specific amounts. The bars can be used to compare the different groups represented.

Pie Chart --a circular graph with different segments representing parts of a fixed or whole amount. The whole pie or circle represents 100% of something and the slices or wedges represent various percentages or proportions that add up to 100%.

Part One:

1. What are these graphs about?
2. What does this data tell you?
3. According to these charts, what percentage of people in each category are likely to exercise regularly? to smoke? to be overweight?
4. Does any of this information surprise you?
5. What groups are more likely to be healthy? Why do you think this is so?
6. Do these charts reflect what you know about your family, friends, and other people you know?
7. Why do you think less education is linked to poorer health behaviors?
8. Why do you think males exercise more but are also more likely to smoke and be overweight?
9. Can you think of any information that these charts left out? What other information would you like to know after looking at these charts?

Part Two:

1. What is this chart about?
2. What does this data tell you?
3. What are the leading causes of death for adults in the United States?
4. Do you think these figures would be different for different ages, sexes, races? Why or why not?
5. Were you surprised by any of the information in this chart?
6. What other information would you like to know after looking at this chart?

Activity #2: Solving Common Health Problems

Overview and Rationale

Our students face many problems that affect their health and quality of life. While some of these problems may be beyond their immediate control, others can be tackled and solved. This activity includes "case studies" that present potentially life-threatening problems in the form of fictional letters. Through reading and discussion, students will begin to have a clearer understanding of these problems and will generate ideas about how to solve them. The philosophy underlying this activity is that simply learning information about how to be healthy does not motivate most adults to solve health problems. Instead, real change comes about through the combination of acquiring knowledge and altering attitudes and behaviors. This activity uses a group problem-solving approach based on the belief that many heads are better than one. Adults are more likely to enact positive life-style changes when they feel a sense of ownership over the decision to enact change. This is more likely to occur when adults have been actively involved in the process of generating solutions to the kinds of dilemmas they face.

Skills Developed in this Activity

Critical reading and critical discussion skills.

Materials Needed for this Activity

✓ A copy of the handout entitled "Ask Wanda Wise" (see p. 6) for each learner.

✓ Activity #2 Discussion Guide for you (see box at the right of this page).

How to Prepare for this Activity

✓ Read the letters on the handout and try to predict your learners' ability to read them.

✓ If you believe you need to pre-teach selected vocabulary, identify those words and decide how best to define them for your learners.

✓ Review the discussion questions in the box below, and adapt them based on your own world view and what you know about your learners.

What to Do in the Session

1. Begin by asking your students if they've ever read "Dear Abby" or "Ann Landers." Ask them what they like or don't like about these advice columns. Explain that in today's lesson the class is going to take on the role of an advice-giver. Tell them that the class will be reading letters related to health problems and will be giving advice.
2. Have someone read the first letter out loud. If your students have trouble reading, you can read the letter while they follow along.
3. Lead students through a discussion of the health problem or issue in the letter, referring to the discussion guide. Because students will have a variety of opinions, be flexible with your questions, responding to what students say and using their statements to generate further discussion. The discussion guide provides some questions to start with, but feel free to add your own, depending on the nature of your particular discussion.
4. While students are discussing the problem and generating responses, write down their ideas, comments and advice on the board. You will use this advice when writing a response letter.
5. Now it's time to write a letter of response which they will compose as a group and you will write on the board. Use this opportunity to model how to write a letter. You might want to show the different parts of a letter, including the salutation, body, and closing. You could also have different students go to the board and practice writing different parts of the letter. Copy the letter on paper or computer to use later.
6. Read and discuss the other letters in turn, using the discussion guide. Write response letters for each one, being sure to get a copy of each letter the group composes before erasing them from the board.
7. When you have time, type up each letter of response that the class generated. You can post these letters in the classroom so that students can see them in their final format. You will have a chance to use these letters later after you complete Activity #3.

Activity #2 Discussion Guide

General Questions:

For each letter, ask questions like: "What is this letter about?" and "What advice should we give this person?" When students respond, follow-up their responses by asking questions such as "Why?" and "Is that true?" and "Does everyone agree with that?"

Central Themes:

1. Doubtful in Athens addresses the issue of poor nutrition. Doctors suggest that for optimum health and energy, we should eat low-fat, low-cholesterol diets, cut down on red meat, and eat plenty of fresh fruits, vegetables, and grains.

2. Hiding out in Atlanta deals with the problems of violence and unsafe neighborhoods. While there are no easy solutions to these problems, this letter can give students an opportunity to discuss their ideas and experiences.

3. Scared to death in Rome addresses the problem of heart attacks. Research suggests that the risk of heart attack can be decreased through proper diet, stress reduction, exercise, quitting smoking, and cutting down on alcohol consumption.

4. Fearful in Valdosta addresses the problem of domestic violence. When discussing this letter, make sure you get students talking about what options an abused spouse has in your area (e.g. women's shelters, support groups).

5. Concerned in Albany deals with the problems of smoking and second hand smoke inhalation, both of which are associated with increased risk of lung cancer. You can discuss ways to quit smoking, including use of nicotine patches and gum, along with oral aids such as carrot sticks and toothpicks.

6. Hesitant in Macon addresses the issue of breast cancer. Breast self-examination helps to catch cancer early, thus increasing chances of safe recovery. A healthy diet also helps to prevent breast cancer.

7. Confused in Savannah brings up the problems of sexually-transmitted diseases, including AIDS. Students might also discuss birth control and other safe-sex issues.

Activity #3: Getting Information About How to Live Longer

Overview and Rationale

This activity, which will be conducted over several class periods, can be used alone or as a follow-up to Activity Two. In this activity, students will get a chance to further investigate the health issues discussed in the "Ask Wanda Wise" activity. It requires outside research work on the part of your adult learners, but it stresses the idea that research can involve a variety of different media. Research can be conducted not only by going to the library, but also by reading magazines, newspapers, and other readily accessible sources.

In this activity, students will choose a health topic that is relevant to their lives, gather information about that topic (hopefully in the form of an article, newspaper clipping, etc.), and bring the information to class. Using these articles, the class will compile a group reader or booklet, which can then be used as curriculum material in the classroom.

We feel that this activity can enhance and enrich your students' learning experiences in several ways. It provides students with a chance to learn more information about topics that are personally important to them, thereby forming a stronger link or connection between the classroom and their lives. And because the class will compile its own reader, this activity also gives students more autonomy and sense of control over their curriculum. Hopefully, they will come to see learning as something that is personally relevant, and worth continuing even after they leave the program.

Skills Developed In This Activity

Information gathering, reading, and discussion skills.

Materials Needed for This Activity

✓ A copy of the handout entitled "Activity #3: Getting More Information About How to Live Longer" for each learner (see p. 7).

How to Prepare for This Activity

✓ Review the handout and try to predict your learners' ability to read them.

✓ Decide if you need to pre-teach any vocabulary, and plan accordingly.

What to Do in the Sessions

Planning:

1. The first session will be devoted to planning. Explain that in this activity everyone in the class will be conducting research to find out more information about health issues that concern them. You could start out with a general discussion about information gathering, asking students something like "where do people get their health related information?"
2. Distribute the handout. If you have strong readers in your group, select one to read the passage at the top of the page; if not, read it aloud while students follow along. Ask students if they have done research before, pointing out that if they have ever found information in any of the various sources listed, they were conducting a type of research.
3. Continue reading the handout, focusing on the choices of topics. When reading the topics, you should give a brief description of each one.
4. Now read the "directions" section of the handout. Ask students if they understand what they are being asked to do.
5. Now it's time for students to pick topics. Read through the topics again, this time asking for volunteers. Students should be able to choose topics to study, but it would be helpful if the topics chosen reflect at least some variety (hopefully everyone won't pick the same topic).
6. When students have chosen their topics, have them check off the box beside their topic on their own research sheet. Tell them they can bring this sheet with them when they do their research. Now they're ready to go find information!

Researching:

7. Allow enough time for students to carry out their research (about a week), and encourage and remind them to bring their information to class. Talk with each student to find out how his or her research is going. If students are having trouble finding articles, bring in some magazines and newspapers so that you can help them find something. There are health sections in almost every newspaper and in many magazines.
8. Start collecting and compiling what students bring in and show the class how the pile of readings is growing as more people bring in their research.

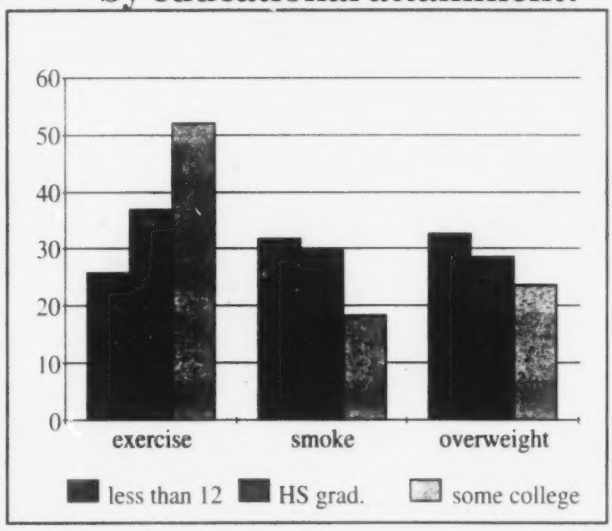
Compiling and Using the Reader:

9. When you feel that everyone has had sufficient time and opportunity to participate in the research project, it's time to compile the research into a class booklet or reader. Make enough photocopies of the articles that were brought in for each reader, and put them together with a colorful cover entitled something like, "Living Longer: Reading Materials Selected by Students at *Your Program Name*."
10. When the reader is ready, distribute it to the class. Present an overview of the reader, explaining what each of the articles is about, and giving learners a chance to say something about which article they brought in, where they found it, and why those chose it.
11. Use the reader as curriculum material. You might want to designate a certain amount of time each week or each class meeting to go over one article. If you have strong readers in your group, have one read the article. If not, read the article yourself. Afterwards, ask questions like "What did you learn from this article that you didn't know before?"; "What was the main point of this article?"; and "Do you believe what this article is telling you? Why or why not?"
12. As an optional activity, you could re-read the letters that the group wrote in the "Ask Wanda Wise" activity, and ask students if they have learned anything from their class research that would change the advice they gave.

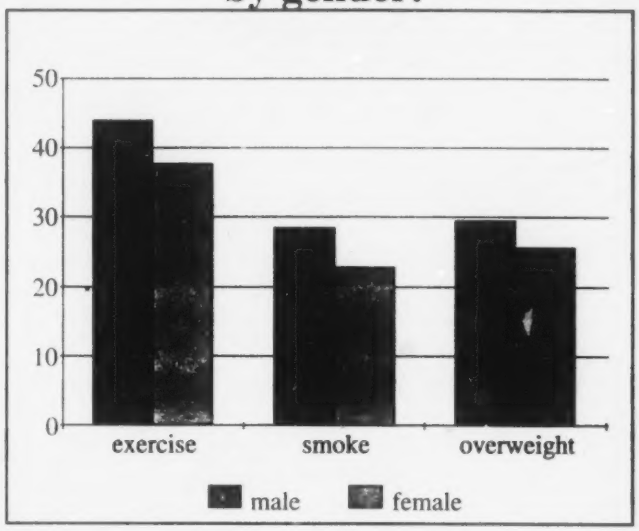
Activity #1: Examining Health Statistics

Part One: Percents of population who exercise regularly, who smoke, and who are 20% overweight...

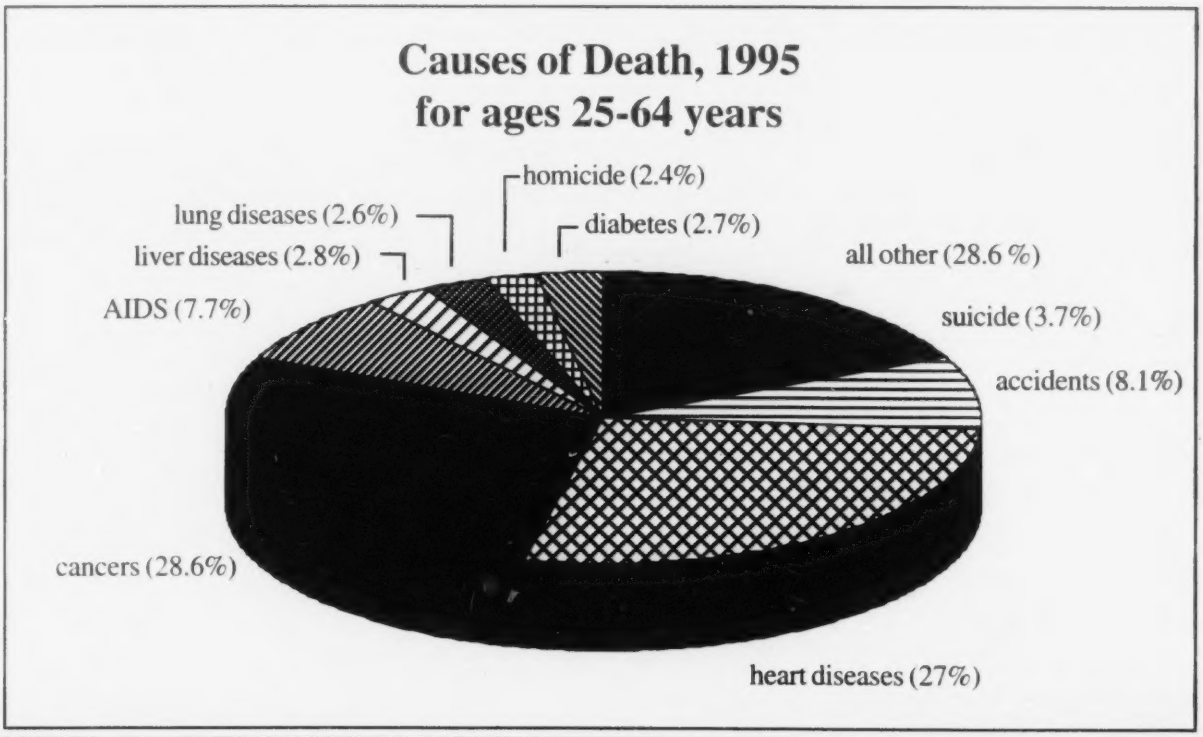
by educational attainment:



by gender:



Part Two: Leading Causes of Death



Ask Wanda Wise

Dear Wanda:

I've been hearing lately that fast food is bad for you, but my family and I eat it and we seem to be feeling fine. We might be just a little overweight, but who isn't? How bad can it really be for you? Is there something else I should know?

Doubtful in Athens

Dear Wanda:

My neighborhood is getting dangerous. Sometimes I hear gunshots at night. There is no steady work for the young people, and many of them are so frustrated that they start dealing drugs and joining gangs. If my sons live to be 18 it will be a blessing! I can't afford to move, but I'm afraid that if I stay something violent will happen to me or my family. How can I keep my family safe in an unsafe neighborhood?

Hiding Out in Atlanta

Dear Wanda:

My father died of a heart attack when he was 42 years old. My uncle died of a heart attack when he was 54. And my brother has been having chest pains lately. I'm afraid I'm next! All I can think about is dying young. Am I doomed? What can I do to keep my heart as healthy as I can?

Scared to Death in Rome

Dear Wanda:

I'm afraid of my husband, and I don't know what to do. When we first got married he used to hit me a little. I never thought anything of it, and it stopped for a long time. Lately he has been drinking more and has started hitting me again. This time it's a lot worse, and sometimes I fear for my life. People at work see my bruises but I tell them I ran into a wall or something - they must think I'm very clumsy! What should I do? I want to tell someone but I also love my husband and am afraid I'll just get hurt worse if I tell.

Fearful in Valdosta

Dear Wanda:

I'm getting frustrated. My wife and I are both 45 years old. She still smokes but I quit 10 years ago. I tell her at least four times a day how bad smoking is for you, but she won't listen. I suppose it's her right to do what she wants to, but I care about her health, and don't want her to get lung cancer later. Also, I don't like breathing all of that second hand smoke. What can I do?

Concerned in Albany

Dear Wanda:

My sister says that breast cancer can be prevented, and that it's important to give yourself exams. I don't want to get cancer, but I feel funny examining myself. Besides, can it really make a difference?

Hesitant in Macon

Dear Wanda:

My boyfriend says that if I really love him, I won't keep making him use protection when we are intimate. He says that as long as we're faithful to each other, I don't have to worry about diseases. Is he right?

Confused in Savannah

Activity #3: Getting More Information About How to Live Longer

You can change your life! One of the advantages of reading is being able to do research about topics that affect your life. Researching a topic means finding and gathering information that you are looking for. Information about health and living longer is available in many places. You can find it in newspapers, magazines, and in books at the library. You can also find health information and information about living longer by talking to friends, family, and neighbors, and by watching television. There are many resources out there -- so let's start researching and exploring!

In this activity you will do research on one of the following topics (or another health topic that you're interested in):

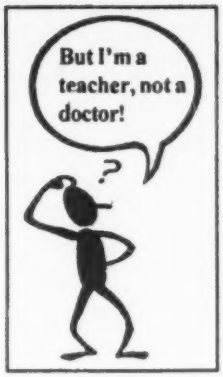
- ☐ **quitting smoking**
- ☐ **losing weight**
- ☐ **exercising**
- ☐ **having a healthy baby**
- ☐ **preventing breast cancer**
- ☐ **eating healthy foods**
- ☐ **preventing heart attacks**
- ☐ **creating safe neighborhoods**
- ☐ **strengthening relationships**
- ☐ **stopping substance abuse**
- ☐ **practicing safe sex**
- ☐ **controlling diabetes**

Directions:

1. Select one of the topics that really matter to you or someone you know.

2. Find information about that topic that you can bring to class. You might want to look in magazines or newspapers that you have at home already. Or, you could go to the library and find information there. If you ask the librarian, he or she will be able to help you find what you're looking for. You can also go to your local health clinic or hospital and ask for information. They usually have pamphlets, booklets, and other materials available for free.

3. Bring the information you found to class so that you can discuss it and share it with the others in your class.



Something to Think About

Some teachers might be reluctant to introduce health education into their classrooms. After all, teachers aren't doctors and they don't necessarily have definitive answers about complex health issues. If you stop and think about it, though, you'll realize that no one has definitive answers about many health issues. Every year, we read news stories about what does and does not constitute a healthy diet--and the new information often conflicts with last year's news. Doctors debate what is the best form and amount of exercise, what reduces cancer risks, and the effectiveness of drugs and treatments for any number of diseases.

As adults in modern society, we have to process such contradictory information and make choices about how we want to live our lives. The essential skill for such a process is accessing and evaluating information--and that's exactly the skill we focused on in writing these activities. You don't have to be a medical expert to teach these activities, because you're not teaching facts. Instead, you will be teaching your students to acquire, share, and critically evaluate--through peer discussions--the kind of information that could have a very real effect on their health and longevity.

Special Thanks! to our advisory committee for their valuable and insightful input and suggestions. Thanks also to Ellen McDonald, Andy Page, Douglas Anne Taylor, and the adult learners in their classes for their help in field-testing these activities.

For More Information

Web Sites

National Center for Health Statistics:
http://www.cdc.gov/nchswww/nchshome.htm

Food and Nutrition Information Center:
http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic

U.S. Census Bureau: http://www.census.gov

Statistical Abstract of the U.S.:
http://www.census.gov/stat_abstract

GA County Profiles (Census Data):
http://www.census.gov/datamap/www/13.html

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